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ABSTRACT

The curriculum now being taught in many kindergartens is profoundly different from what it was two decades ago. The kindergarten classroom, once conceived of as a play- and group adjustment-oriented setting, may now also be a classroom with an "academic" approach, characterized by direct teaching of discrete skills with specific expectations for achievement. This type of rigid curriculum is less responsive than others to wide ranges in age and ability and many schools have resorted to retention and extra-year programs for children. The "academic" approach to kindergarten is in contrast to a "child-centered" approach in which activities are based on the goal of moving each child as far forward in his or her development as possible. In child-centered kindergartens, linguistic competence is a primary goal and is promoted though appropriate language experiences and through conversations with adults and peers. Activities are child-initiated and children are provided large blocks of time in which to finish projects. Advocates of developmental kindergarten programs should emphasize the effectiveness of an active learning. (PCB)

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The Shifting Kindergarten Curriculum

Harriet A. Egertson

This digest reviews factors influencing kindergarten curriculum, and contrasts characteristics of skill–based and developmentally oriented programs.

Current Influences on the Curriculum

Few would argue that what is now taught and expected to be learned in many kindergartens is profoundly different from what it was two decades ago. The shift from play– and group adjustment–oriented settings to kindergarten classrooms characterized by direct teaching of discrete skills and specific expectations for achievement is being reinforced by recent calls for reform of public education (Elkind, 1986).

Critics of the trend toward skill–based kindergartens are not advocating a return to outmoded educational practices of the past. However, much new research about children's learning confirms some historical beliefs about effective educational practices. Unfortunately, this well–known and respected body of research information is often ignored in the formulation of curriculum for today's kindergarten (Spodek, 1986).

Most children entering kindergarten today have much wider experience outside the home than children of the past. As a result, many teachers, administrators, and parents believe that more advanced content is necessary. Others are concerned that younger five–year–olds may find it difficult to be successful if the kindergarten curriculum is too advanced. Some parents delay their child's entrance to kindergarten for a year to give the child the advantage of being the oldest in the class.

Many preschools and child care centers try to teach content identified by kindergarten teachers as prerequisite to kindergarten success. It is not uncommon now to find child care and preschool settings in which children spend prolonged periods sitting at tables trying to complete pencil and paper tasks which would be inappropriate even for substantially older children. Parents often shop for the program that promises the most in terms of promoting kindergarten readiness.

These practices have led to the widespread use of screening and readiness tests prior to kindergarten entrance to determine whether children are likely to be successful in school (Egertson, 1987). There is wide agreement, however, that such measures are often poorly constructed, inappropriately used, and likely to screen out those children most likely to benefit (NAECS/SDE, 1987).

A rigid lock-step curriculum is less responsive than others to the new wider age and ability–ranged groups. Hence, schools have increasingly resorted to retention and extra–year programs for children who have difficulty with the expectations of regular kindergarten. Transition placements usually occur either the year before or the year after kindergarten. However well–intentioned those who organize these classes may be, "transition class" is simply a more palatable term for "retention."

Since teachers tend to direct instruction to older and more able children, more of the younger children tend to be held out or placed in extra–year classes. As a result, curricular expectations tend to be raised. Research provides little evidence that children placed in transition classes achieve any more than their non-retained or nontransitioned counterparts in either cognitive or social–emotional domains (Smith and Shepard, 1987).

Contrasts in Kindergarten Practice

It is common to hear the curricular polarity in kindergarten described as "academic" versus "child-centered." Unfortunately, neither term is explicit and use of the terms without sufficient elaboration often contributes to further lack of understanding and defensiveness.

An "academic" kindergarten is usually characterized by the direct teaching of specific discrete skills, particularly in reading and math, which children are expected to master before going to first grade. The daily schedule is usually broken into many small segments, often because it is believed that children do not have a sufficient attention span to enable them to work longer at a task. The majority of the instructional materials used in these classes are the kindergarten level of major series in reading and math. Often teachers use additional workbooks for phonics.

If interest centers are used, they are designed primarily to teach specific skills. Time for active exploration in the arts, science, or social studies is limited. Other common characteristics of skill–based programs in-

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clude: (1) limited availability of, or independent use of, concrete materials; (2) much pencil–and–paper–oriented independent work; (3) little opportunity for conversation among children and between children and adults.

Kindergarten programs derived from a child development orientation may exhibit some of the characteristics of skill–based kindergartens. They are, however, driven by an entirely different philosophical viewpoint. The child-centered kindergarten does not base activities on the learning of discrete skills, but rather follows the mission of moving each child as far forward in his or her development as possible. Goals emphasize maintenance and development of dispositions to go on learning (Katz and others, 1987).

The child-centered kindergarten offers experiences to children in a physical setting which has been carefully designed to increase the likelihood that these experiences will occur. Linguistic competence is a primary goal, and language experiences appropriate for each child's stage of literacy development underlie the entire curriculum. Conversations among children and between children and adults are viewed as important to the development of linguistic competence. Independence and responsibility are promoted by child–initiated activities and expanded blocks of time which allow children to finish projects. Materials are logically organized, usually into several interest areas containing many options from which children self-select activities. The complexity of the materials ranges from easy to difficult, so that a wide range of abilities is accommodated.

Conclusion

The forces which have led to the development of skill–based programs are reactive and largely ignore the early childhood research base. Redefinition of the kindergarten–primary curriculum from a developmental perspective is more beneficial for children than the use of retention and extra–year placement. Advocates of developmental kindergarten programs should emphasize the effectiveness of an active learning setting for advancing children's growth and development.

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